THE WORLD'S

Cotton Centennial Exposition

POEM.

Mary Ashley Townsend.

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POEM,

BY

MARY ASHLEY TOWNSEND.

READ AT THE INAUGURAL CEREMONIES.

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Cotton Centennial Poem.

MARY ASHLEY TOWNSEND.

Though feeling thrill the soul's profoundest chords—
Though language search among her choisest hoards—
  Mid scenes, and hours, and moments such as these,
How vain the pomp of pen, the pride of words—
  To thoughts unuttered are the victories!

Sublime Inspirer of this wondrous day,
While continents thy lightest beck obey,
  From off his soul the singer's sorcery slips!
Amidst thy triumphs turn to him, and lay
  Thy touch divine upon his halting lips.

Oh, Freedom! gentle Mother of us all,
What hallelujahs hold our hearts in thrall,
  As we to-day behold thy noble grace:
And know the kingliest crown is, after all,
  As nothing to the glory of thy face!

Sweet Liberty! thy blazing torch afar,
From out the desert leads man, as the star
  Of old the shepherds led to Bethlehem:—
Shine, till remotest kings their helms unbar,
  And bend to kiss thy garment's shining hem!

And may the fruitful fervor of this hour
So send thy name from Fame's eternal tower,
  'Twill echo round the planet's widest girth;
Till doubting nations rise and own thy power,
  And Freedom's dazzling temple domes the earth!

Among thy lustrous triumphs be it scrolled,
Thy hand from woman's clouded destiny rolled
  The stone that held her from her rightful place,
And led her brave feet to thy foremost fold,
  Among advancing heroes of her race!

The rolling drum, the trumpet's noisy blare,
The colors yonder, tangled with the air,
  The pomp of nations and their pageantries—
The splendors that with splendors here compare—
  Not these the symbols of man's power—not these!

The sobbing engines set their psalms to him—
The metals, mastered by his lightest whim,
  He with a single finger can control:
Till cold machines, waked from their slumbers grim,
  So human seem, they only lack a soul.

The depths of earth his eager feet have pressed;
The loftiest heights his daring arm caressed:
  No sphinx so frowning but his lips have kissed,
And coaxed her secret from her stony breast,
  To sit a hooded falcon on his wrist.

The subtle force he gathers from the skies
And buckles to his strengthful energies,—
  The mighty giants that his genius throws,
And fetters to his daring enterprise—
  These, with their chaplets bind his god-like brows!

My gaze I lift above these palaced plains,
Where Peace her proudest victory maintains,
  Remembering those we never may forget;
And as the eye the empyrean gains,
  De Soto smiles and Joliet and Marquette:

And brave La Salle, and Iberville are there,
This consummation of their dreams to share;
  They, with Bienville, greet us from on high,
To all the honors of this day co-heir—
  Such names, such deeds, such heroes never die.

Here smiles their fair-faced Louisiana, lo!
Mere fraction of her regal self—but oh,
  A splendid fraction still! Behold, she stands
With lips that with their gladness overflow,
  And welcomes for the world in her sweet hands!

The blood of Spain is warm upon her cheek,
The fire of France is sparkling in her eye,

And Creole graces sit upon her brow,
And tune the witching cadence of her voice.
As radiant she, as Sheba, when she stood
Before the throne of Solomon, the king;
And beauteous as was Miriam, when she clashed
Her joyful cymbals on the Red Sea's shore!

The fabled isle whereon Ulysses roved,
A seven years' captive to Calypsos' charms,
Not fairer was, than are these fruitful plains
Where Louisiana's glowing gardens spread
Their sumptuous blossoms to the generous sun!
Her sweet-sapped cane-fields glitter in the light,
Their jocund juices reveling in the stalks
Which shake their shining pennons in the wind.
The golden apples of Hesperides
Their mellow bounty drop o'er every hedge.
To her majestic live oak man may go
To cull the moss for beauty's yielding couch,
Or cut for ponderous ships their rugged ribs:
Her opulent magnolia, year by year,
Rebuilds its ivory villages, and sends
Its pomp of perfume out to freight the air;
While that white blessing which God gave the world,
The bounteous cotton, in its ripened grace
O'er regal acres spreads its frostless snow.
The tawny river the explorer found
A lonely monarch in a wilderness,
Now, commerce-crowned, goes sweeping to the sea,
Past cultured prairies once the cypress claimed.
And lo, her valleys sleeping in the sun!
Beneath the flowers which make their coverlet
Undreamed-of treasures hide them for that day
When Labor, wedded to the soil, shall wake
Them all to marriage gladness, and great gifts,
And unexampled harvests! And she calls—
Calls loud, and sweet, with voice of all the South,
"Come hither, oh, ye weary sons of toil.

Come hither, ye who labor and despair
And spend your strength on unrewarding stones;
Here bring the hearts that break for want of work,
Here bring your brains, your sinews and your powers.
Come hither, and beneath these generous skies
Build up your homes, and rear your little ones!

Let the thick smoke of factories strangle vice,
And busy spade and plow turn o'er the glebe,
'Till buried Idleness can rise no more!
And when the day's sweet labor shall be done,
And balmy eve lies pillowed on her flowers,
The yellow moon will light the moss-roofed path
Where you may walk with your beloved, and wear
On your uplifted brows contentment's crown!

And still beyond these crystal gates, sweet lands
Enticements hold for enterprise to find—
Not only buried cities, and the tombs
Of ruined kingdoms and forgotten kings,
But worlds of wonder to rejoice his eyes.
Rich as that marvelous cave of Eastern tale,
The Southwest yonder smiles, scarce out of sight,
Waiting the voice of commerce to ring out
The magic "Open Sesame," that will fling
The mystic portals wide for him who seeks!

So doth she stand upon this festal day,
Our radiant Louisiana—peerless queen—
Crowned, and in all her loveliest array,
In roses sandaled—robed in living green,
A smile on her red mouth,—
She stands for North and South,—
She stands for West and East,—
For greatest and for least—
One of the starry band,
That luminous makes the land,
A welcoming smile and glance to throw,
From far Cathay, to neighboring Mexico.

Among the powers
That lustre shed upon these potent hours,

One lingers near,
Cotton, that ruler of each hemisphere.
Far in the east of earth
It had its silent birth.
The centuries knew it long ere Jesus came
To thrill the ages with His sacred name.
It bound of old,
In many a twisted fold,
The turbaned brows
Of Pharoahs.

With her rude distaff sitting in the shade,
The Indian woman so attenuate made
The thread she spun—
Its woven fabric on the green turf spread,
The envious spider looked upon, and fled
Dismayed to see his delicate web outdone.
The Hindu watched it, while night's mystic psalms
Breathed in the lofty branches of the palms;
Beside the Brahmin temple's sacred calms
He guarded there,
For holiest rites, its long, white, silky hair.
Nations were born and nations passed away,
Monarchs and monarchies crumbled to decay—
Slowly the old gave place unto the new,
Yet it still lived and grew.
From Orient
To Occident
With steady step it went,
Creeping, creeping,
While the world was sleeping.
Like to some conscious blessing sent from God,
Gently across the hemisphere it trod,
Uuntil it passed
To Freedom's all-embracing arms at last.
Now, lo! its victories
Blossom on every breeze,
Sweep o'er the lands and seas,—

And from earth's battlements,
While all the world assents,
Hangs its white banner—over the Continents.

With shouts of exultation
Now from the old plantation,
Work, and his happy neighbor
Health, hand in hand with Labor,
Come shouting and come singing,
Their praises hither bringing,
To the music of the clicking of the hoes,
They are chanting
Of the planting,
Of the merry cotton picking in the rows:
When the brown bolls first
To ripe perfection burst,
For the glad beginning
Of the Autumn ginning.

And their song sweeps along,
To the sigh that mounts the sky
From the Press, as it withdraws
Its black, and ponderous jaws
From the compressed bale,
And with distended mouth waits another to assail.
They are coming, they are coming,
To the music of the humming
Of the throstles, and the spindles, and the wheels,
Of the jennies, and the rollers, and the reels,
Of the ginning and the spinning,
Of the burring and the whirring,
Of the shafts as they run
In the glimmer of the sun:
To the clatter of the mills
'Mid the valleys and the hills:
To the loom's sweet laughter
Under roof and rafter!

From the spring of freedom quaffing,
They are coming, they are laughing

As they come hand in hand,
Merry tillers of the land ;
For in every humble cot,
Some worker's bitter lot
This angel of the toiler has touched—and it was not!
Nearer yet their peans swelling
They are saying, they are telling,
How this power they honor well
Hath upon it holy spell.
How it lightens human needs,
How it clothes and how it feeds,
How it shineth at the door
Of the sorrowing and the poor,
And a blessing leaves behind it—
Wheresoever toilers find it!

Now sweet as bugles, grand as throb of drums,
As from strong-throated men an anthem comes
Rolling in rich harmonious amplitudes
Along the lands, across the ocean's floods,
Strains that will echo from the goldon pages
Of shining gospels of the coming ages.
Hark! 'tis the chant of noble exultation
Which bursts from nations gathered as one nation ;
The hosts who come as children of one father,
Beneath the standards of our land to gather ;
The voice of multitudes who hither turn
To this great school where all may teach, all learn.
The torrid, temperate and frigid zone,
Earth's noble trinity, here three in one,
Within this tabernacle of the free,
Stand 'mid the marvels of their century.
Here are the precious splendors of the mine,
The Arctic trophy and the tropic vine ;
The car that rushes at the maddest speed
Across a continent, without a steed ;
The sounder by which one can hear to-day
The clock that ticks a thousand miles away ;
The lightning, harnessed to the alphabet,

Or to the most Herculean labors set:
The wire on which one's words can walk the seas;
The telephone, the vast discoveries,
Which make illustrious the Book of Time
And write the nineteenth century sublime!

Invention, science, agriculture, art
And genius in these triumphs all take part.
Of these are they
Who throttle ignorance to-day:
And where she dies
The darkness flies
From off the shadowed features of the sphere
As clouds before the sunlight disappear.

Not he who is to loftiest plan inclined,
The man alone who benefits mankind;
Who in the point the needle's eye did place,
Became the benefactor of his race,
No less than he whose magnet needle turns
Steadfast to where the northern planet burns:
The microscope which finds the dire microbe
Is more to millions dwelling on the globe
Than is the telescope which in its might
Discerns the unknown comet sail in sight.
The lifeboat battling with the boiling wave,
The shipwrecked sailor in the shrouds to save,
More precious is to scores of anxious hearts
Than yon Great Eastern with her mighty parts
Stretched on the billows, bending o'er the sea,
Amazing men by mere immensity!

And hark ye yet, for still another voice
Speaks unto all, and bids the world rejoice!
The ponderous engine whose prodigious power
Holds up a thousand triumphs to this hour,
Bids men remember from how slight a thing
The most exultant victories may spring;
And from its great heart earnestly it cries,
"Behold! this day is full of prophecies,
Of splendid promises for all who aim
The shaft of Effort, to bring down A Name!"

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